

Liberty Under the Old Order

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FOR a brief season during these post-War years, the word *liberty* was not uttered lightly in the Land of Freedom. It was a term to be watched with care. The army had not approved of it during the War, nor were military leaders in love with the word after peace returned; Big Business doubted its moral worth, while prohibitionists were sure there was something wrong with it. Any man who stood for liberty one hundred per cent was under deep suspicion of belonging to a weird and detestable group known as the *bolsheviki*. One rarely endorsed the term without a quick explanation that he did not stand for *license* — which is the liberty other people take of doing what you do not want them to do.

Then suddenly the word entered the vocabulary of the most respectable citizens; in the highest social circles today, one may hear it discussed with utter abandon. Mr. Herbert Hoover, whom some may remember as one-time president of the United States, has written a book on the subject. Mr. Ogden Mills, in whose newspaper the best department stores delight to advertise, has given a series of lectures about it. We have had liberty all along, it seems, even when not mentioning it, but now we are about to lose it. In its place a terrific condition known as *regimentation* is appearing, and something must be done by patriots to stop this. For example, one way would be to put a

Republican in the White House in place of Mr. Roosevelt.

This is astonishing enough. But perhaps the most surprising performance of all has been the birth, growth, and maturity of the Liberty League, a bipartisan organization of corporation lawyers in happy communion with disappointed politicians. These ardent defenders of things-as-they-used-to-be (before the stock market fell) are going to "preserve American institutions which safeguard, to citizens in all walks of life, the right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness". One concrete method employed by the League is to furnish legal help free to patriotic Americans who are about to lose their liberty — or at least some of their property. In general, property-owners are to be saved from the clutches of the socialists.

As if this state of affairs were not enchanting enough, one hears of still another group which is furnishing legal help to Americans about to lose their liberty. This is the American Civil Liberties Union, which sends around lawyers when capitalists are about to deprive workingmen of their precious heritage. Thus while a Liberty League protects capitalists from the socialists, a Liberties Union saves socialists from the capitalists.

With so many varieties of liberty at stake, it is the purpose of this article to make an examination of the type of freedom enjoyed in those days when Messrs. Hoover and Mills, along with the directors of the Liberty League, lived in a country of which they approved. At that time, of course, if anyone did not like this country, he could go back to Russia where he belonged. But these are more mellow, tolerant times.

Now when men disapprove of this country, they have the easier choice of joining the Liberty League.

Perhaps a brief historical background will be of some help to the inquiry. We have been saving the country for liberty for a great many years in a most peculiar manner. The narrative is connected closely with the history of the Republican party. This remarkable collection of zealots and wheelhorses came into being around the middle of the preceding century; and its first words in its babyhood days were of freedom, which was to be given the Negro slave in the Southern part of the Federal Union. The gesture was appealing as long as one forbore to look far into the background. Then the picture became more complex.

In order to bring such a boon to the Negro slave, it was necessary to conquer the Southern whites. They were deprived of their liberty of withdrawing from a union they did not care to maintain; they were forced to submit to ten years of military rule; they were frequently forbidden the freedom of petition, or assemblage, or of choosing their own governors in a democratic manner. Proceeding further along these strange paths of freedom, the Republican party moved to insure to the former slave his civil liberties by an amendment to the Constitution. The latter forbade states to deprive any person of his rights; then it was revealed that the new business corporations of the period were "persons". As a result, the hamstrung states were not allowed to enact any laws which might curb the monopolies then throttling the liberties of small business men. So while romanticists thought about the Negroes, the courts paid closer attention to corporations; and the Republican party had registered another

unique triumph in its battle for its own peculiar sort of liberty.

Down through the decades of the nineteenth century, Big Business grew with the Fourteenth Amendment as its guardian and the Republican party its handmaiden. Each year witnessed the collapse of independent business houses, the growth of large corporations, holding companies, and trusts. All the while, industrial magnates prattled of liberty and celebrated the Fourth of July. By the turn of the century, it was apparent to the more intelligent part of the populace that the Grand Old Party, while pretending to worship liberty, was on the point of shipwrecking it.

Revolt was in the air, but the Republicans pursued their course serenely. When the pretense of standing for liberty could hardly be made any longer in face of the inroads made by the Big Business machine upon all sorts of freedom, they resorted to epithets. Anyone who attacked the ruling order was a *demagogue*. When Woodrow Wilson reached the White House later on with a vigorous program for breaking up business combines and curbing Big Business pressure, he was a *socialist* disturbing good business men who were out for profits that rightfully come to men of brains and energy.

Mr. Wilson frightened the apostles of Big Business as no one had ever done before. Everything charged against Mr. Roosevelt today was said just as bitterly about Woodrow Wilson twenty years ago. But happily a war intervened to save the Republicans. All of Mr. Wilson's schemes went awry, and he himself was broken amid their wreckage. Industrialism, Big Business, and the Grand Old Party emerged triumphant.

On the threshold of the days which Messrs. Hoover and Mills hold so dear, the Republicans took charge of the country once more.

They were still saving it — this time from a new danger. The Communists were coming! And though they never did arrive, they furnished a new set of epithets to be applied to all who did not like the Ruling Order. Chief among them was the term *bolshevik*, a word of Russian origin so vague in its precise meaning to most Americans that it could be applied almost anywhere. Before it the stoutest Liberal heart was apt to tremble. All impulses toward Liberalism were viewed with misgiving. Never since the balmy days when the army ruled the Southern states, had Big Business faced less danger of opposition and revolt. With the aid of the Republican party it gave the country the regime that it desired; and evidently if the Liberty League has its way, that economic and social order of the nineteen-twenties will be restored.

It was surely a topheavy regime for a Land of Freedom. According to a *Report on National Wealth and Income* issued by our Federal Trade Commission in the rosiest period, one per cent of the American people owned fifty-nine per cent of the wealth; while barely one-tenth of the national riches was in the possession of the poorest eighty-seven per cent of the population. It would require a stout social order of freemen to preserve liberty under conditions such as these. But that was not half the story.

We were also growing into a nation of employees. The absorption of independent business concerns by Big Business, which pre-war Americans had fought with such bitterness, increased tenfold during the

Twinkling Twenties. Hence the fate of an employee in one of these big concerns is surely a good case-study of freedom during the period which the Liberty League loves to honor. Henry Ford is one of their heroes — a prototype of liberty; a champion of American individualism. But if one wants a picture of an average American in an industrial system, he surely goes down into the factory rather than into the owner's office.

Nobody bossed Mr. Ford, not even Wall Street; he ran his own independent concern. But he told his employees whether they might smoke, or dance, or stay out late at nights; and between their lives and his was all the difference in the world.

Slowly the curtain has been lifted on the picture of an American employee at his daily tasks in any industrial machine. No future lay before him brighter than that of continued employment; though perhaps he would be promoted to a point where he could enjoy the thrilling experience of being master of other men's souls in the system. Ability to do his handiwork was only one asset on the road to success. There were other qualities demanded of him by his company, such as *loyalty* and *cooperation* — words that might easily carry with them some curious meanings.

The heart-bottom wish of the American worker was "to obtain the maximum of freedom for showing what manner of man he was by the nature of his handiwork". Such was the observation of Whiting Williams after a sojourn as laborer himself in all manner of factories. The great burning problem before every employee was to retain his job; the ever-present

fear was the possibility of losing it. Seasonal lay-offs occurred in many industries; or sometimes the inefficiency of an owner or manager caused the closing of business concerns and factories.

But the general consensus of opinions of writers concerned with the vital subject of a worker's bread and butter was that disagreement with a foreman or boss was the daily threat to an employee's happiness and life. Ninety-eight per cent of the labor disputes that the government was called upon to solve during the War simmered down finally to some petty quarrel between a foreman and his man, according to a member of the War Labor Board.

In many companies, well-organized and up-to-date, a daily "progress card" was kept upon which were recorded all spoiled work, arguments, absences, insubordination, and other "objective facts of importance" that would come up when there was a chance for promotion. This was a systematic way of protecting the employee from the sudden anger of his boss, it was explained. The record card could be reviewed when the boss reached a cooler moment. Sometimes these items along with other choice tidbits about a man's personal conduct were listed in a *character rating*. Of course, absences from work were checked carefully. A visit by a company representative usually took place at the home of a worker after the first or second day of non-attendance. It might be "a kindly act . . . or it might be an occasion for prying into purely personal affairs". Without trained experience, admitted one student in the field of character rating, it was indeed difficult to distinguish between *ability* and *cooperation*.

We have a flood of literature and special lectures and consultants [wrote Hugo Diemer] preaching a philosophy of success in which how to reach the boss, how to impress him, and how to sell him ideas, overshadow the importance of basic ability and honesty. . . . The typical climber wears a mask portraying the highest ethical standards and a cheerful modesty when in the presence of higher officials. . . . He knows what the boss and his wife like to eat, read and talk about.

Though it was not quite clear from then on whether the climber sent the boss baskets of groceries or merely set himself to eating similar food, the picture was a familiar one in modern business. It applied to a factory, a store, or merely a small managerial office where typists, office boys, and clerks lived in one happy "cooperative" family. Stuart Chase had another name for them.

The *yes-man* had no place in American pioneer tradition [he observed]. As the machine breeds specialization, increased technological unemployment, as mergers spread their threat to white-collar jobs, the case grows worse. The greater one's economic insecurity, the greater the tendency to sacrifice spiritual independence and to chant in dreary unison the simple credo of the yes-man. It is my contention that for uncounted millions of Americans the price of integrity is more than they can afford.

The particular loss of integrity to which Mr. Chase referred was involved in the spy system under which employees were rewarded for reporting on their fellow workmen. Here organization reached the point of perfection; here was loyalty burning at fever heat. Naturally no one foreman or manager could tell at once how firmly each cog was welded in the great

machine; but a good neighbor-cog, loyal to his company, could find it out the first day. Perhaps an employee had a capacity for individual thinking and for leading other men that was dangerous to the smooth movement of a well-oiled mechanism. Whiting Williams told of one way to meet this menace. "In too many instances such a report is likely to lead to the *planting* of, say, a bottle of whiskey in the man's clothes, with the later discovery of it by the secret planter, who in horror at such outrageous breaking of plant rules, lands the offender on the street."

When the offender arrived on the outside pavement, the end of the drama was near. During the Twinkling Twenties he shared unemployment with at least four million other Americans. For mergers were threats not only to the independence of certain business men; ordinarily a combination was so economical that a number of workers could be dropped from the combined payroll. Machines too were appearing each year that took the place of human labor. So it was an easy matter to locate another job. "Dismissal of a workman," wrote Sidney Webb, "involves serious dislocation of his life; the demoralization attendant upon looking for work; uprooting of his home; interruption of his children's schooling; many weeks of penury for his family."

Yet it was not beyond reason that the offender upon the outside pavement still had some ability within him that a trained observer could distinguish from "cooperation". Perhaps he could work right well with another sort of boss. But his past record would ever rise to meet him.

"Except in the case of the most inexperienced nov-

ice, more consideration is probably given to the past industrial record of the applicant in determining his acceptance or rejection than to any other single factor," wrote Dr. Donald Laird.

. . . We find prospective employers writing to previous employers for information about the skill and behavior of the applicant while in their employ. Other firms he has served, perhaps unsuccessfully, or perhaps with a record of fights, arguments, disobedience, dissatisfaction-breeding, and so on, are certain not to be mentioned [in the references he carries with him]. The obvious course in writing firms [to which he has referred] is to get a statement of the length of time in fact that the applicant served. Then if his employment record is complete for five years or more, the applicant is not holding out on probably unfavorable testimonials.

Small wonder Tead and Metcalf comment that "the black-marking of a man for a first offense may debar him from securing employment anywhere in the locality". They might have added, "and perhaps in the whole United States".

The check-up was now complete. Daily record card, visitors to the home, spying upon one's neighbor in the name of *loyalty*, ability to perform the job merely a secondary requirement, chanting the dreary song of the yes-man, an employer's blacklist for discharged workers. That was no exaggerated picture for a nation of employees; yet industry could justify every item in this familiar program. It was a normal development when a man's employment and livelihood depended upon the will and whim of a single superior in his business machine. Even spying could be listed under a less objectionable name; in high

schools and colleges, where it was urged upon school-children, the term used was *honor system*.

No institutions caught more readily the infectious spirit of the organized age than the new retail chain stores. Regulation was not only a necessity but a pleasure. Even the managers practised the goose-step. One in Danville, Virginia, played baseball in the city league under an assumed name because his management frowned on outside activities; another in Gulfport, Mississippi, was forced to reject repeated invitations to join a fraternal lodge, because it was against his management's policy. Pledges in respect to taking a drink or puffing a cigarette were on hand for new employees to sign in some of the chains; then any slight backsliding could be punished by expulsion because a word of honor had been broken. A daily shave was a demand made by one firm, which also instructed its department heads as to the style, color, and cut of their clothes; the purchase of a private automobile by an employee was made the subject of another company's rules; a third showed a lively interest in the attitude of clerks toward hitch-hikers on a country road. Surely a business could survive without taking a hand in such private items as these.

"Character ratings" under watchful eyes of this sort soon reached a moral height that put the early American Puritan in the background. Behavior during business hours was only one part of the record card. "We will not retain in our employ a man who, if married, does not enjoy the right kind of home life," intoned one soulful judge over the fates of other men. "Neither will we retain a man who is unable to live within his means." And in that way bank accounts entered the

scope of the moral review. In fact, about the only relief for a family from the eyes of the company "operative" came on the nights when its head went back to the shop to work. To the ordinary chain store the model life for an "associate" was one wrapped up day and night in the business; if dreams could have been censored, the owners doubtless would have been happier.

When such conditions were brought to the attention of a leader of industry and men, he was quite impatient with prattlings about liberty. Such methods were necessary in the interests of Efficiency. Anyway, a fair-minded, tactful employer or manager could operate such a system without wounding or ruffling the feelings of their underlings; he might take every other method of discipline before he discharged one of his men. Not all firms stooped to use whiskey bottles as mediums for a choice frame-up; it merely occurred "too often".

But here a case-study of liberty is being made for the Liberty League, which hates regimentation and will not have it in American life. The system described above surely had within it no elements of human freedom; the possibilities for oppression were terrifying. Character ratings and record cards, moral guardians and a spy system: such are essential features of regimentation.

In fact, Big Business itself in time grew dubious of its own creation. As the Twinkling Twenties progressed, a new character was added to the drama; the personnel manager made his bow, with his life devoted to the human rights and happiness of employed men.

The utter worthlessness of the whole system as far as human liberty was concerned quickly became apparent as some solution for the helplessness of employees was sought.

Personnel work was a flower of the World War. Though some factory- and mill-owners of an earlier age with a flair for righteousness had been paternal toward their men, the "expert and devotee to science" was a twentieth-century product. A mighty literature at once emerged from the presses about him; and in it first-hand information was certainly given out on the petty meanness that so easily arose in the organized system. But the point, of course, was that evils would now be wiped away; the personnel manager was going to be the dramatic defender of human rights. If only he had been spared a scientific outlook, he might have been some help.

But as a true expert he sought refuge in more "record cards" than ever, and added mental tests for new men applying for work. The latter had already been applied to private soldiers, schoolchildren, and inmates of penitentiaries; it was fully time for industrial employees to come within their scope. One chain store, reaching out as usual for perfection, gave the same questions orally three times in order to keep a strict lookout for lying on part of the applicant; then turned down any unfortunate who tapped his foot during the performance since this showed nervous instability. But some flaw must have existed since further records from the same store showed two employees later being graduated into an insane asylum. At any rate mental tests were a relief from the ever-present employer's blacklist; a man whose past record

of "non-cooperation" was choking him might be able to go through mumbo-jumbo successfully.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of personnel work was along lines of ice-cream and cake. It was determined scientifically that employees needed recreation in order to work well, but they could hardly be allowed to seek it out for themselves; so physical-culture drills entered the daily regime. There were set minutes in which every worker should relax — thus carrying the twitching of the muscles within the purview of an overseer. Parks outside the window of a factory, swimming pools, skating rinks, moving-picture halls began to dot the industrial scene. A steel magnate delving into the new lore discovered music which, according to tradition, was used with effect on savage beasts and therefore ought to be of some help with cogs. Orchestras, radios, brass bands, and pianos entered the worker's life. One valuable contribution came out of a canning factory where a manager revealed that a radio delivered its biggest *kick* if the employees paid for it themselves. "Discontent," commented an observer, "is now being smothered under fried fish, potato-salad, and ice-cream. The workers are kept so busy being grateful that they have little time for grouching."

Boldly science tackled the tender relationships between man and boss; it remodelled the latter. No longer was the model boss a hardboiled foreman who dared his workers to start something. Now he must have "a ready smile, preferably with a tooth or two missing (to look more democratic)", wrote Philip Wagner in *The American Mercury*. "He must have a ruddy complexion and a hearty Y.M.C.A. manner."

Meantime personnel managers spoke eloquently of the "human element", which they treated with "the dispassionate engineering point of view". Thrift experts taught employees how to invest wages in the stock of the company; that not only gave them more interest in their firm but made it tougher on the heart strings in case any parting seemed necessary. Intriguing little devices to reward the well-behaved by means of bonuses were invented.

But there was a limit to all good movements, as a shoe company in New York State discovered. There the happy family of workers who had invested in company stock began to wonder out loud about the profits they were supposed to receive. Rebellion was quickly nipped in the bud with a reprimand from the president: "The profit-sharing is not necessarily a permanent plan. To those who are dissatisfied with the results of last year's business, I recommend a prompt resignation. . . . I wish such would quit. I am sincere in this wish." The happy family was beginning to resemble Uncle Tom's Cabin with Eliza going out on the ice after dark. But when murmurs died out, uplift re-entered. The president, like a fond father, gave the children a golf course where for modest fees they might play the same game he did at his more select clubs.

There still remained the fact that men went into outer darkness whenever they displeased the next cog higher up in the system. So along with personnel managers came committees of fellow workers to pass upon an employee's dismissal; also to confer on items of company management. It did seem cynical to doubt the virtue of this reform; on paper the plan sounded

excellent. But labor unions, which had devoted more than a century of attention to employee rights, suspected the shop committees from the start; they sounded like a pallid substitute for union pressure. When Professor Herbert Feis, of the University of Cincinnati, began to investigate their operations, he found that the calendar of business consisted mainly of a report of management decisions brought forward at previous meetings; then petty grievances were considered briefly. *Cooperation* was still at work, with employees centering on the *co-ing*.

The Filene Store, of Boston, was franker than most companies. It permitted to be published the entire proceedings of a case in which a shop committee heard the plea of an elevator operator to keep his job when his boss wanted to fire him. It was presented as an example of fairness in modern industry; as a case-study in modern liberty its revelations were startling.

Joe Dodge, the fictitious name given the criminal, had been found guilty of "freshness" by an overseer of elevator boys. So "charges" were preferred before the shop committee; "defense and prosecuting attorneys" were named; and all the trappings of a murder trial were assembled — except mercifully a gaping crowd, since the proceedings were held in secret. It was perhaps not a happy afternoon for Joe who faced the moral dangers of unemployment so well described elsewhere by Sidney Webb; but the other performers apparently enjoyed themselves hugely.

Joe was a good lawyer himself. One high moment came when he was allowed to question Miss White,

a saleslady who took the role of witness for "the prosecution". According to court records, the following valuable testimony was offered:

A. [from Miss White] "I was waiting to go down."

Q. [from Joe] "I beg to differ; you were going up."

A. "I was waiting to go down."

Q. "It was when I went down that I asked you which way you were going. You said you were going up."

A. "I did not."

Q. [from Joe's attorney] "Is it your understanding that the young lady called you a liar?"

After the upward-downward movement had been threshed out, another serious charge developed. Joe, with his mind set on the old fashioned motto of "Safety First", had refused to load his elevator with as many passengers as the boss desired. Then on another occasion Joe told a saleslady to mind her own business. From these monstrous crimes Joe was eventually declared Not Guilty by a vote of seven to five, but he was duly warned that from then on his boss could dismiss him for the slightest grievance, and he was also suspended two weeks without pay.

The jury of committeemen sympathized with the boss. Joe had too much brains to operate an elevator properly. But of course the way of the wicked turned out to be hard, and after two months Joe resigned. The boss had known all along that he would; he was that type. With his usual "freshness", Joe declared in resigning that "the executive was prejudiced against him".

Evidently the path of *cooperation* was still just about the same. What happened to Joe after that we do not know. It did seem that his admitted brain-

power might be used somewhere. But he was a member of the employer's blacklist after that resignation, and there were millions of other unemployed also clamoring for a right to live. Of course, there is a bare chance that science saved him; he may have found shelter elsewhere after taking an intelligence test.

The case of Joe Dodge in the end merely served to emphasize the fact that bigness itself in organization precludes real liberty. "Liberty," says Mr. Hoover, "is a thing of the spirit"; and perhaps that is what is the matter with his own peculiar type of the commodity. But for the ordinary run of us, it is a matter distinctly practical. It has to do with our relations every day to other human beings. When one man's livelihood depends absolutely upon the opinions and whims of a superior higher up in the system, then that man is not free. His privilege of casting one vote at a civic or national election is of no help to him whatsoever. His position in a privately-owned business concern is just the same as if he were in a government bureau; he is the member of a regiment in spite of all that the Liberty League may say about it.

But the leaders of industry simply closed their eyes to what was going on beneath them. At the top they were still smug in their own independence. By their side, the lawyers, doctors, and other members of the professional classes cheered for the independence of a system wherein they lost some vestige of independence every year. At the outer fringe, the farmers looked on bewildered. A freedom that involved a mortgage on a farm, barnyard, and home was not impressive. Industrialism was moving into the farming

regions; if it did not take freedom away from the farmers, it exploited them so thoroughly that liberty was hardly worth while.

It was a restless, unhappy civilization buoyed on one hope alone — and that one wrapped up in a small line of tape that ticked in an endless stream from machines located in brokers' offices. Stocks and bonds were always rising and the humblest worker had been taught to invest his savings. According to some of the reputable economists, this happy feature of the period would never end; stocks and bonds had reached "a permanently high plateau".

The imaginary future did hold after all some other hope than the never-ending monotony of an employee's life. Even the thrift experts of the companies themselves spoke of the promise of future profits. Some day stocks and bonds would reach such dizzy heights that an independent income would be the fortune of a faithful, obedient worker who "cooperated" and saved. Then he could withdraw from the great system and cease to worry about its workings, for they would no longer affect him. Then he would be a free man — that is, a man who did not work. A republic that had been founded on the dignity of labor had evolved an industrial system whose members found happiness only by escaping from its clutches.

At the close of the era, every economic movement that tended to destroy small, independent business and small, free farms was being encouraged by the ruling order. The only system ever evolved in the world to protect genuine human liberty was being submerged with a business-like efficiency. In the midst of it Her-

bert Hoover, titular head of the Republican party, was lauding American individualism to the skies. The old, familiar game was being played once more, according to the rules used in 1860, 1880, and 1900. The Republican party, while pretending to worship liberty, was doing everything in its power to destroy it. In the history of political democracies, it is doubtful whether any party has had such an unblemished record for insincerity.

As far as the Liberty League is concerned, even the Democrats so carefully elected to high posts in the organization, in order to keep the bi-partisan flavor, seem to regard the America of the Twinkling Twenties as a Land of Freedom—as contrasted with America today when freedom is on the run. The devotion paid to liberty by members of the noble order ought to be appreciated by Liberals all over the globe. But a picture of the inside of their minds would be as fascinating as any of their tracts on the Bill of Rights. Every objection they offer now to regimentation in government bureaus would apply with equal force to that regime which most of them helped to produce and to which none of them seems to object. The only charitable explanation to be given for their present performance is that they have no comprehension whatever of that economic and social order that stands to them for liberty.